

December 4, 2005

Prophets 2

I Kings 16 and following

We start our study of the prophets with the colorful and dynamic Elijah, Troubler of Israel.

Elijah was a self proclaimed prophet of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, during the reign of General Omri and particularly during the time of his son Ahab and his notorious wife Jezebel. First off I will try to capsule his life found in the book of Kings starting with 1Kings Chapter 16. We will follow his life history with three valuable lessons that he leaves for us today: What to do when the brook dries up; his condemnation of Israelites for being wishy-washy in their beliefs; the power of one man against the crowd.

Elijah was born around 900 B.C. in the land of Gilead. Gilead was known for its herbs used in preparing what was known as the “balm of Gilead” which was used in perfumes and medicines.

Bordering Israel was a country known as Phoenicia.

Phoenicia was principally made up of three city states: Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos. King Omar made an alliance with Phoenicia that was strengthened by the marriage of his son Ahab to Jezebel the daughter of the Tyreian priest-king of Phoenicia.

Like Solomon the builder, Omar constructed the colossal citadel city of Samaria. When Prince Ahab took over the kingdom he built an ornate palace known as the “Ivory House”: because of the tremendous amount of ivory with which it was decorated. Next to the Ivory House he built a temple to Baal to house 850 pagan priests that Jezebel brought with her from Tyre. Baalism was a nature cult. Worshipers joined with priests and temple prostitutes in sacred orgies before the altar. Their New Year celebrations are reported to have been something else. In time of crisis such as a famine they would go so far as to sacrifice first borns in their sacred fire.

From this base and as a part of her zeal to make Baalism the state religion Jezebel harassed and even executed the

prophets of the Lord. Needless to say this didn't encourage the worship of Yahweh.

It was to this religious crisis that Elijah first appears.

Dressed in his leather loin cloth and coat of hair he came out of the land of Gilead headed for Samaria. In his strange garb he walked past the houses of the common people that clustered around the city of Samaria; past the steps to the city where the city elders held court; past the market place; past the guard tower; past the homes of the officials into the palace itself. He faced King Ahab with condemnation for the paganism that breached the Israelites' covenant with the Lord. He summed up his condemnation with the Lord's punishment: ***“As the Lord God of Israel lives before whom I stand there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”***

And then Elijah was gone almost as if he had vanished. He hid in an isolated area by a brook that fed into the river Jordan. As the story goes ravens brought him food each morning and night. But as the drought drug on the brook dried up.

Following the Lord's directions Elijah went to a little village near the port city of Sidon. At the village gate he met a poor widow woman gathering twigs for a fire. Elijah asked her for water and something to eat. The poor woman pleaded that she only had a handful of barley meal and a little oil which was barely enough to feed her and her son. This was about as poor as poor could be.

Elijah instructed her to make him a little cake out of the meal and the oil. Then with the familiar words of a prophet Elijah announced, ***"This sayeth the Lord: The jar of meal shall not be spent and the jug of oil shall not fail until the day the Lord sends rain upon the earth."***

And it came to be. The widow took Elijah in and let him live in the attic of her house as the drought drug on. Suddenly the woman's child became ill and died. Elijah took the boy into his room, stretched himself over the boy three times and prayed, ***"O' Lord my God let this boy's soul come into him again."*** Life returned.

Following God's direction Elijah again sought out King Ahab. The King greeted Elijah with a description that would stick with him through the ages, "*Troubler of Israel.*"

Elijah returned the compliment and chastised Ahab for forsaking God's commandment. This was followed by a command in the form of a challenge. Ahab was to assemble all of Israel at Mount Carmel along with the 850 priests of Baal that ate at Jezebel's table. When the crowd gathered Elijah greeted them with this challenge: "*How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if it be Baal, then follow him.*" Elijah then pointed out that he alone was a prophet of the Lord while Baal's prophets were 450. But maybe numbers didn't matter.

Elijah called on the prophets of Baal to a test. Each, the 450 and the one were to cut up a bull and lay it on wood but put no fire to it. The priests of Baal were to call on their god and Elijah would call on the Lord and the god who answered by fire, he is God.

All day the priests of Baal danced and chanted around the altar calling on Baal. Nothing happened. After time Elijah began to taunt them. *“Cry louder, if he is god maybe he is asleep.”* This worked Baal’s people into a frenzy, cutting and mutilating themselves. The flowing blood did not promote any response from Baal. Now it was Elijah’s turn. In late afternoon he had a stone altar erected. Green wood was piled on the altar with pieces of the butchered ox on top. All of this pile was soaked with water. Then Elijah called out, *“O Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, let it be known this day that thou art God of Israel.”*

A bolt of lightning consumed the ox, the wood and even the stone altar. What followed was a mass massacre of the priest of Baal. Before Ahab could return to his palace of ivory the drought was broken. While Elijah was able to stomp in the mud puddles and dance before the king as he approached the city he made a deadly enemy out of Jezebel. She threatened to do him in before the sun went down.

Again Elijah took to the hills in hiding. God told him to get back on the job and that he was to seek out a man by the name of Elisha as his successor. In his declining years Elisha and Elijah made a pilgrimage to three cities where groups of prophets lived. Then the aging prophet headed to the Jordan River. He asked Elisha what he could do for him before he was taken from him. Elisha replied, ***“I pray you, let me inherit a double share of your spirit.”***

They came to the River Jordan. Elijah threw down his mantle and the River Jordan parted just as it had when Joshua and his band entered the Promised Land. The two walked across the river on dry land. As they walked and talked a chariot of fire came between them and Elijah was taken upward into Heaven. Elisha picked up his mentor’s mantle and prepared to carry on the battle against the pagan gods and the pagan ways.

Three experiences jump to mind out of Elijah’s life.

One finds him sitting beside the brook when the brook

dried up.

Another found Elijah jumping on the Israelites for being wishy-washy in their beliefs, neither hot nor cold.

The third is when this one man faced the crowd of priests of Baal with all their support from the Queen and carried the day.

Elijah's experience by the brook is not unusual. All of us go through the experience when the brook dries up, when life is difficult, when we seem to have run into a dead end. We come to a time when our resources seem inadequate. When it seems that there is no joy in living.

Beethoven, when he seemed to be at the summit of his career became stone deaf. The brook dried up. He rose out of a deep despair to compose more brilliantly than ever before. We can each come up with individuals who, when the brook dried up, rose to greater heights than before. Even our Lord Jesus Christ came to that part of his ministry when the brook dried up. With few followers and many antagonists the cross became

inevitable. He arose from that yoke victorious.

Charles Allen wrote a little book “Your God is too Small.”

Maybe it seems that the brook dries up because our world is too small. In this world, this life we live, there are resources that enrich and lift up. In the quiet and stillness of the wilderness we can still hear God’s voice, “*Be still and know that I am God!*” God means strength. God means the everlasting arms underneath us. God means hope of a brighter today. In God we find a spring that does not dry up.

As Elijah found out when the brook runs dry it need not be for very long. The same is true of our lives if we ever let Jesus Christ walk with us.

Elijah found that when the brook dried up it wasn’t the end of the story but the path to new opportunities and new resources. When the brook dried up Elijah was guided by a hand that led him from a concern about his own life to the privilege of saving another’s life.

The message that roars out of the life of Elijah is that what

appears to be the end is not the end but a launching pad. Even death is but the opening of the door to a greater life.

Pastor's Message

Hamlet voices a universal dilemma of mankind when we are put to it to decide to "rather bear the ills we have than fly to others we know not of."

Every man sometimes grows weary of his present job, his profession, the place or the particular circumstances under which he has to work or the people he must work with. Some grow so weary of their spouses, the community, their old friends and even the church that they decide to "fly" in some other direction.

When we are "fed up" with things or people as they are we should remind ourselves that human nature and the human lot being what they are, we will find ills of some sort wherever we go. A young minister complained to his bishop that in the church he was serving there was an old woman who was "driving him crazy" and he wished to move. His bishop sagely observed, "And yes, in the place where you want to go there are five old women worse than she is."

It is always best first to give our best efforts toward solving "the ills we have." At least we know what they are and are familiar with them. Woodrow Wilson said "Every man must get used to sitting on his own volcano." Let us "fight it out" with the ills we have if we possibly can live with them.

Sometimes, of course, it is necessary to fly from the ills we have to those we know not of. But, before we do we must be sure that we have time and stomach for adventure and the hardihood to go forth in search of pastures new. Above all, let us be assured that "the ills we know not of" will challenge our intelligence, character, and patience as directly as those from which we have flown.

If one must fly, let him fly to something, not merely from something.

PRAYER

Before I "fly," O God, help me to be certain that I am flying to something better. Amen.